

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



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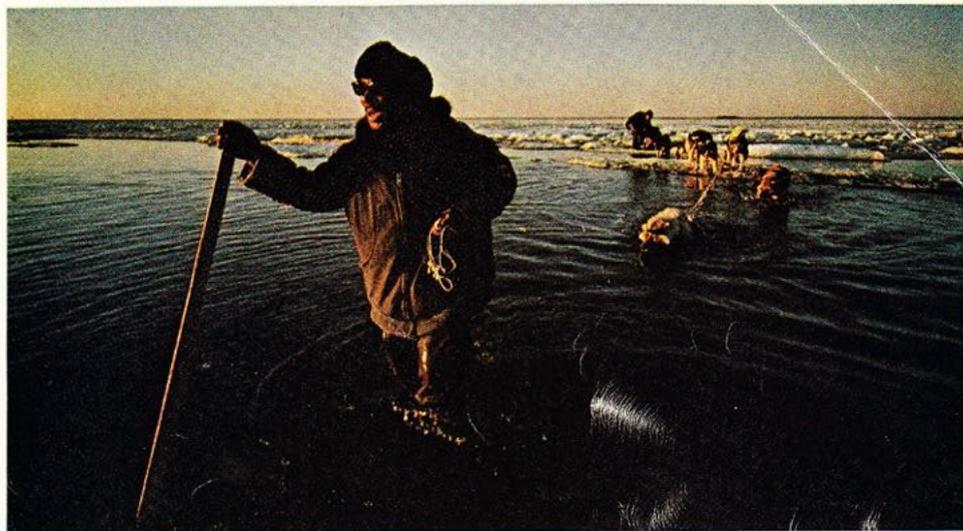
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NICHOLAS DEVORE III

Probing for pitfalls, an Eskimo guide feels his way across flooded ice ahead of author Colin Irwin and seven sled dogs. In a test of stamina and spirit, the young Englishman braved the Arctic's rigors to experience and record the harshness of traditional Eskimo life.

Trek Across Arctic America

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY COLIN IRWIN*

FORTY MILES to Pelly Bay. With every step my boots broke through the fragile crust of snow on the wind-swept tundra. Fatigue numbed the pain in my shoulder, wrenched many miles back—a week ago?—while wrestling our sled across the rough sea ice of the eastern Canadian Arctic. The sled itself we had abandoned early in the morning.

That day we had eaten only broth—water in which I had boiled a frozen caribou stomach left by wolves along our

*Photographer Nicholas DeVore III joined the author's expedition during its final month to make aeriels and other supplementary pictures.

route. Our last solid food had gone a week earlier. I lagged now, and stumbled from time to time. John Etibloena, my Eskimo companion, tied the trace from our remaining dog around my waist. Nothing seemed to stop this dog, a black female I called Blossom. Each time she tugged me I was reminded that, like her, I must not give up.

Three weeks before, we had started from Repulse Bay, 150 miles to the south-east, with nine dogs. One by one they had played out after the food was gone, and we had left them, in the wan hope that some might survive.

Now we, too, trod close to the edge of





"IT IS NOT A LONELY WORLD, but full of interest, always changing, transforming itself," the 27-year-old author recalls of his 2,500-mile Arctic journey. With a tug, the dogs haul the sled over a hump of broken ice; one injured teammate rides lashed to the bedding and supplies.

survival. We could not afford another of the bitter storms that had pinned us down for days on end. We had shed all our equipment save sleeping bags and a knife for cutting snow blocks to build shelter. We rested only two or three minutes at a time; longer stops threatened frostbite as perspiration froze. The effort of walking warmed us and made us thirsty. We ate snow.

At the end of eight hours, we came to a high ridge. From it John looked west toward a string of mountains braced against the sea ice around Pelly Bay. Then, turning to me, he said, "*Taavani qablunaat inuksuyat*—There's the white men's marker."

I knew what he meant. He could see the



JOHN ETIBLOENA

"The frostbite in my fingers is healing,"

Colin writes in an early letter, "but I have lost 12 pounds and my feet are swollen from the long walk." To store up calories against the cold, Colin digs out buttery-tasting caribou marrow (above); Eskimo guide Tipana (facing page) eases hunger pains with slices of rotten seal flipper. Colin was accompanied by three different guides on his trek, sharing their food and hardships.

radar dome of the distant early warning station atop one of the mountains. I looked too; but without my glasses, which fogged up in the bitter cold, my view of anything more than a dozen yards away was a blur.

John estimated the dome to be 20 miles away. Another eight hours. As darkness fell, the flashing lights of the DEW line airstrip pulled us like a magnet, urging us on with a winking promise of food and shelter. We arrived shortly before midnight, having walked the 40 miles in 16 hours.

But that was scarcely the beginning. My final destination was Point Barrow, Alaska, 2,300 miles to the west (map, pages 300-301).

Now, reflecting on those early hardships of my Arctic trek, I view them simply as bad luck. There would be other agonizing setbacks, but never was I truly fearful for my survival. I was challenging the Arctic with ancient Eskimo skills, handed down from father to son for countless generations. But with the passing of the present older generation of Eskimo hunters, these skills are likely to be lost forever. Their sons prefer the snowmobile to the dog team, the prefabricated house to the igloo.

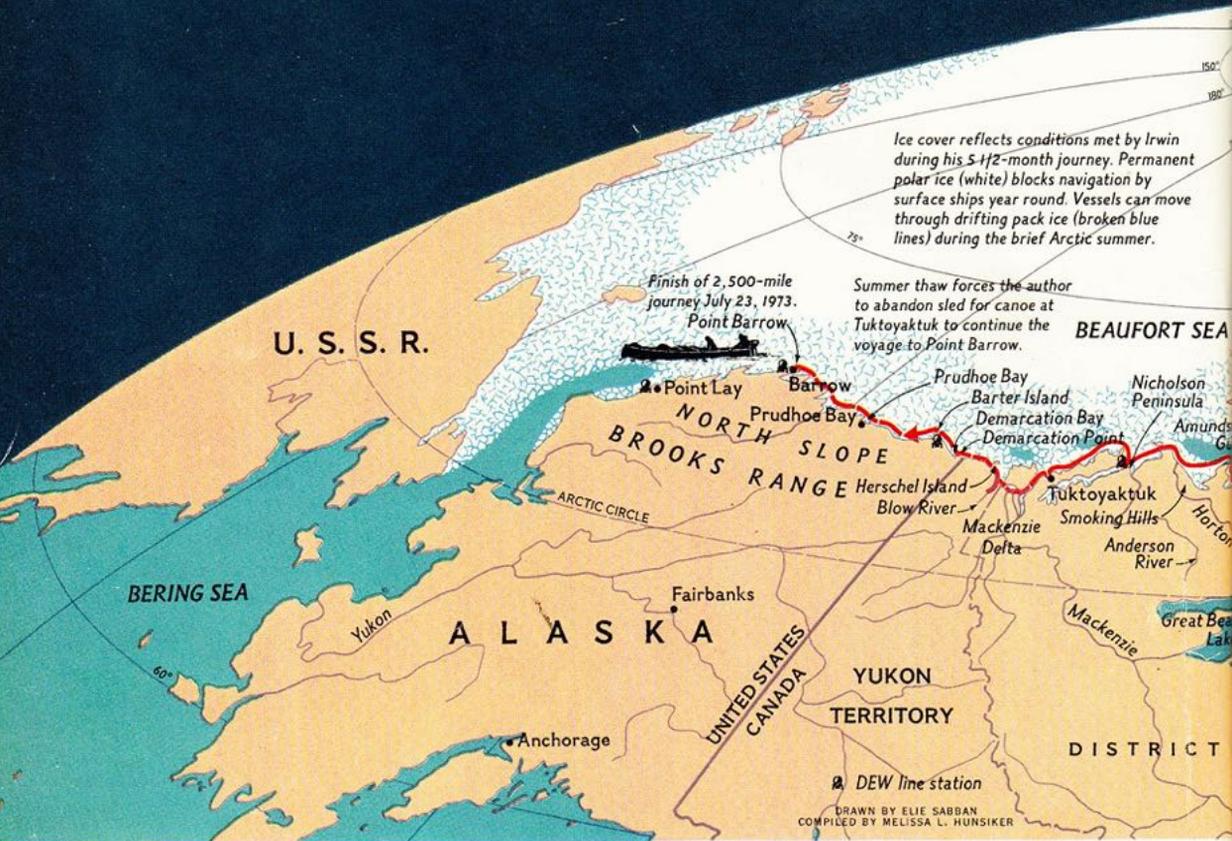
Thus my primary purpose in trekking across the Arctic was to share and record a vanishing way of life. Mine may well be the last such journey; I think few others, if any, now care enough to try.

I ARRIVED in the Canadian Arctic in the summer of 1971 and took a government clerical job in Cambridge Bay, about 600 miles northwest of Hudson Bay. There I spent the winter, living in an Eskimo house and making many Eskimo friends. I developed a deep admiration for the way they faced a hostile environment, always with optimism. I have seen a hunter return to his hungry family exhausted and empty-handed. They laughed, and simply talked of luckier hunts. And that, I knew, took courage.

In February 1973 I left Repulse Bay as an Eskimo would have done half a century ago—with a sled, dog team, and the basic tools for Arctic survival. My plan was to follow the frozen Northwest Passage, along much of the route taken by the explorer Knud Rasmussen, the famed Greenlander who crossed the Arctic with sled and dogs in 1923-24.

Nearly six months would pass before I reached Point Barrow. I would travel through a steely winter with temperatures ranging





Tackling the pathless Arctic without a compass, Colin relied for direction on the position of the sun and the imprint of prevailing winds on the snow. He set out from Repulse Bay in early February, reached the settlement of Tuktoyaktuk by dogsled on June 14, and covered the last 600 miles to Alaska's Point Barrow by motor-powered

down to -60°F. , and a spring heralded by the percussions of cracking ice. I would finish in July, not by dogsled, but in a canoe on the flowing summer sea.

WHILE RESTING in Pelly Bay, I bought ten new dogs from local Eskimos. John retrieved our sled and equipment, and a few days later a plane flew him home to Cambridge Bay in less than three hours—a trip that would take me four weeks.

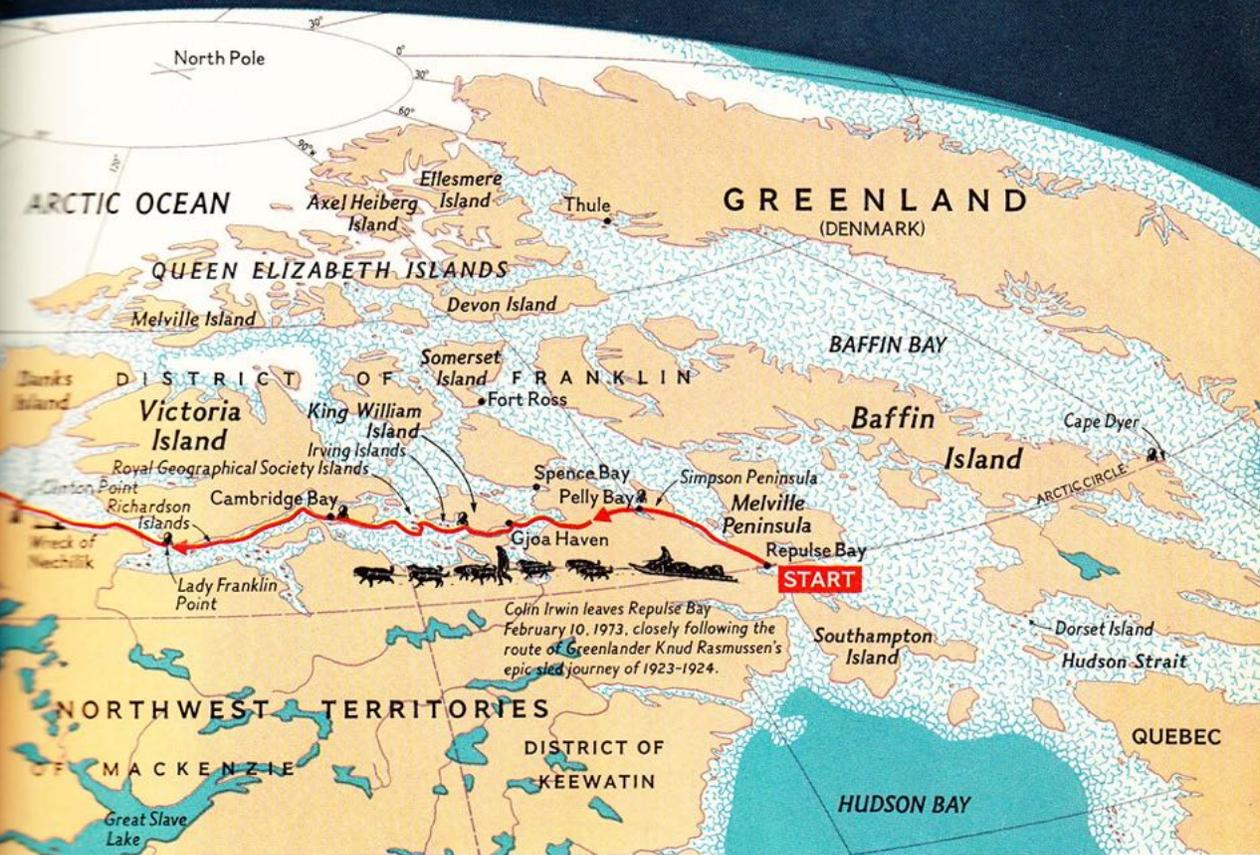
My companion for the next stage of the journey was another old friend, Tipana, who would trek with me as far as his home at Cambridge Bay, some 500 miles to the west. Like other seasoned hunters of his generation, Tipana, in his fifties, was wiry, weathered, and wise—possessing little formal education, but a vast knowledge of the Arctic. He fit my rule of thumb for a traveling companion in the Far North: If he speaks more than a few words of English, disqualify him.

Before leaving Pelly Bay, we replenished our supplies of sugar, tea, coffee, flour, and tobacco. We loaded our 18-foot sled with four rotten seals to be used for dog food; we also carried rifles for hunting caribou.

I hoped that we would have better luck in taking game than we'd had on the first leg of the trip. Certainly, I did not want to write another entry in my diary such as the one for March 2:

We both had a little caribou stomach half-way through the day as we have no meat left. I don't mind eating rancid seal, but I don't care at all for such leftovers as innards. If this carries on much longer, I'm afraid I'm going to eat one of the dogs. . . .

After traveling for two days out of Pelly Bay, we realized that we had missed our planned route through a high mountain pass. We came across a hunting party—two men and a boy—and they led us to a new course along a lake in a valley cut by glaciers if



canoe. Plagued by hunger, cold, and mind-blurring fatigue on the 5½-month trek, Colin retraced a route set by the pioneering Arctic explorer Knud Rasmussen 50 years before. Colin was first drawn to the Arctic by an urge to sail the Northwest Passage west to east—a feat he hopes to accomplish this summer in his boat *Endeavour*.

another age. As it was then late, we decided to put in for the night.

While I chained the dogs, Tipana and the hunters searched for suitable snow with which to build an igloo. As they walked, they listened for the deep, resounding squeak indicating a thick and firm drift. They probed with knives to determine the texture of layers laid down in successive storms.

Finding a site, the hunters cut a trench about 18 inches deep and three feet wide. They placed six-inch-thick blocks of snow in a circle around the trench, building upward in a spiral pattern until there was room at the apex for just one block (page 308). As they worked with knives to ensure proper fit, I pressed snow into the cracks, then shoveled more over the shelter.

The larger house was for the hunters and the boy. Tipana built a smaller one next to it, and when both were completed, we knocked out the wall between the two.

The ability to build a snowhouse quickly and well was without question the native skill most essential to our survival. Hunger, of course, is painful, especially in the Arctic cold when the body burns calories unceasingly; but life is sustained by the hope that tomorrow will find a seal or caribou in the rifle sights. If equipment fails or is lost, one can usually improvise.

But there is no substitute for shelter in the Arctic. Not when the wind is blowing to produce a chill factor of more than 100 degrees below zero; not when the snow swirls until sky and land fuse into a blinding wall of white; not when heavy breathing can freeze the tissues of your lungs.

And so it was on the morning after we made camp with the hunters. A storm had come up during the night, and by the time we awoke it was obvious that travel would be impossible that day. Rather, I had biscuits and tea, and then crawled back into my



sleeping bag, where I slept away most of the morning in the warmth of the igloo.

As we were setting out the following morning, one of the dogs started to misbehave. Unable to find the whip, I clouted him on the head with my hand. The result was a broken bone, and there are those, I know, who will be pleased to learn that the bone was in my hand.

I was taught to respect animals, to treat them with kindness and understanding. But in the Arctic, all of us—dogs and men—are in the same kettle. We have to put up with the same cold and hunger. There were times during my trek when I was so hungry that I ate rotten fish from a fox trap, and the remains of a seal left by a polar bear.

I became, in short, no less a scavenger than my dogs. My primary business was survival.

I did indeed hit the dogs on occasion, but only when it was necessary for all of us. For example, there was a time when a storm was about to overtake us. A cache of food lay some five miles ahead. If the storm caught us, we might have nothing to eat for three days or more; an Arctic blow often takes that long to subside.

The dogs, however, did not want to go on. I could not say to them, "Now look, my friends, if we go only five more miles we'll be safe." All I could do was strike them, forcing them on toward the cache. Thus I survived, and so did they.

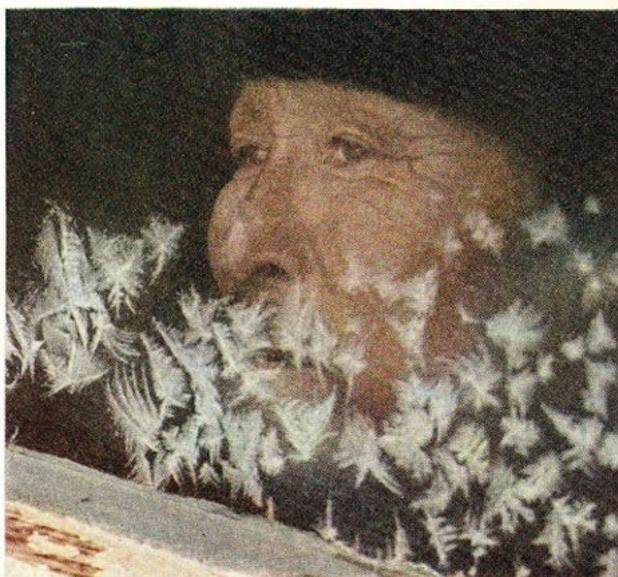
As long as the dogs remained strong and well fed, Tipana and I often rode on the sled. At the beginning of the trip, layers of dark mud had been caked on the wooden runners, allowed to freeze, then planed smooth. Each day we smeared water over the mud with a scrap of polar bear skin; the water froze instantly. This coating of ice against ice made the Eskimo's time-honored means of travel remarkably efficient. The original mud cast on the runners held up until spring, when we switched to steel runners (left).

BY EARLY APRIL we were approaching Gjoa Haven. There Roald Amundsen—first to navigate the Northwest Passage—called with his stout sloop *Gjoa* in 1903. This fine, deep little harbor came into view on the day that I made this entry in my diary:

We set off a little late after a breakfast of coffee only. I had a cigarette made of tobacco wrapped in a page from this notebook. We are certainly on the right course now, but the

Stark domes and spires of an electronic cathedral—the distant early warning station at Lady Franklin Point—loom above the tundra. Napaseekadlak replaces the sled's mud runners with strips of steel (**facing page**). In extreme cold the wooden runners are smeared with mud, then slicked with ice to let them skate quickly over winter terrain. Melting snow and ice call for the more durable steel.

Feathers of frost partially mask Napaseekadlak's deep-seamed face as he gazes from an Eskimo home (**below**). Outside, 60-mile-an-hour winds blast snow into the coat of a curled-up sled dog (**bottom**).



dogs are slow, for they haven't eaten in several days. As for me, I am weaker than when I walked into Pelly Bay. I am afraid the reserves of my body are about used up. I get a little dizzy sometimes, and I can't keep warm even when I walk. I also have a little snow blindness in my left eye. I keep thinking of food. Huge slices of bread with gobs of jam. My body has reached its limit, but somehow I keep one foot going in front of the other.

All our friends were on the beach to meet us when we arrived in Gjoa Haven, a cluster of frame buildings including a Hudson's Bay Company store and a school. We stayed for three days, during which time I feasted with Eskimo friends and had my eye and the broken bone in my hand tended to at the government nursing station.

Before we left Gjoa Haven, the daughter of Hikitook, my host, refurbished my caribou-skin boots, split and worn from more than 400 miles of travel. She sewed coils of thongs to the bottoms, giving me nonskid soles that left my signature in rich print with every step.

My parka, mittens, and pants were all made of caribou skin—dried and scraped three times to make it pliable—as were my socks, worn with the fur inside. The fur around the hood of my parka was wolverine. When ice from my frozen breath collected in this strong, thick matting, I could easily beat it out with a stick. Well insulated by these garments, I was rarely bothered by the extreme cold, except after going hungry for several days.

THE CARIBOU sustained us in another way, too—as our major source of food. If we didn't wear it, we ate it. I learned to relish the marrow of caribou bone (the taste is similar to that of butter). Once we even used frozen caribou legs for tent pegs. Our sleeping skins were from the caribou. Little wonder, then, that we watched closely for tracks of this animal as we traveled.

We saw none for 400 miles after leaving Gjoa Haven. We traveled first in a southwest direction, moving along the coast of King William Island. The dogs were sluggish, and we made little progress before stopping for the night. The next day I had an accident, as recorded in my diary on April 8:

I did a silly thing today. I was eating a tin of corned beef with my snow knife, and while daydreaming I licked the bits of fat and meat off the knife. Of course the knife froze to my

lip instantly, and I lost a large piece of skin when I pulled it away. The wound bled freely.

Passing the Irving Islands, we continued west over the sea ice until we came to the Royal Geographical Society Islands. As always, we used the drift patterns of the snow as our principal navigational aid; here the prevailing winds blow from the northwest.

"Cambridge Bay in three or four more sleeps," Tipana said cheerfully as we prepared camp. He would be glad to get home. It was a clear and beautiful evening, and the fields of rough ice all around blushed under the touch of soft and fading light—a scene of utter serenity. Yet this was polar bear country, and they are creatures of unpredictable humor. Fortunately none appeared to challenge our intrusion.

Nearing Cambridge Bay, we saw our first ptarmigan since starting the trip. They were lazy birds, refusing to fly away even when the dogs lunged toward them.

SENSING that food and rest awaited them, the dogs perked up, and we were carried into Cambridge Bay on a burst of speed. Tipana's children were there to meet us, scrambling onto the sled for the final hundred-yard ride into the settlement.

With its population of about 700, a DEW line station, three churches, and a Royal Canadian Mounted Police post, Cambridge Bay now seemed a virtual city spread across the empty Arctic landscape.

I made quickly for the familiar house of my good friend Kamaoyoak, a kind and extremely intelligent man who still believes an Eskimo must live off the land if he is to maintain his pride. He is probably the best hunter in Cambridge Bay, but to me he is much more than that. I had wintered and ranged afield with him the year before, and despite the gulf between our ages and cultures, he had treated me as a brother. It was Kamaoyoak who taught me almost all I know about Eskimo survival skills.

Kamaoyoak greeted me with little emotion. He stared at my face, now lined and weathered like his own, after more than two months on the trail. "You look old," he said.

Our relationship had changed somehow. He viewed me differently. I was saddened and puzzled. Not until several months later, after ending my trip, would I come to understand his attitude.

Napaseekadlak joined me at Cambridge



Faced by open water, Napaseekadlak eases a huge block of ice into position.



Yelping and whimpering at their uneasy footing, the dogs cross the gangplank.



Stepping gingerly, Napaseekadlak guides the heavily laden sled safely to the other side.

Bay for the 1,800-mile remainder of my journey. Round-faced, with jet-black hair despite his 60 years, he was short but had the strength and stamina of a man half his age.

Preparing for departure, we obtained steel runners for the sled, for we would soon have to change from mud. We also purchased a tent. It was now the end of April, and would shortly be mild enough for canvas shelter.

Leaving Cambridge Bay I jotted down:

We collected all our stuff and loaded the sled. Then all our friends helped us hitch the dogs up. As we were short one harness, one old man took the harness from the lead dog of his team and gave it to us. We left at 2 p.m. with ten dogs. Napaseekadlak and I rode all the way, traveled for eight hours before making camp.

Our route took us through the Richardson Islands, high and black against the late-night sun, then west, until a 60-mile-an-hour wind caught us. We struggled to get the tent up behind a snowbank, and when we did, the canvas snapped like a whip. The snow swirled until there was no visibility; our world seemed encased in an eggshell. We stayed in the tent for a day and a night, frustrated by the knowledge that there was a DEW line station only an hour's sled drive away.

We lost one dog in the storm, a small white female given to us in Gjoa Haven. With a team of nine, including Blossom, who had been with me from the start, we continued west. Suddenly the lead dog, having caught the scent of an animal, veered off the trail.

Then all the dogs were running for the nearby hills. I pushed down the sled anchor—a heavy metal hook—with all my weight. Snow sprayed us as the team raced forward.

Flushed from the hills by the noise of the dogs, two small caribou came into view. Napaseekadlak quickly dropped off the sled into a sitting position, the .243-caliber rifle in his hands. He squeezed the trigger, but the weapon misfired. Another squeeze, another click. "This gun is no good," he muttered, and reached for the .22-caliber rifle. Finally he brought down the nearer of the two caribou.

We butchered the animal quickly. Entrails, rib cage, and head were fed to the dogs. The skin became part of our sleeping gear. After packing the hindquarters on the sled, we dined on the tongue and the muscles of the legs. We boiled some ribs and some of the vertebrae, breaking the bones to extract

the marrow and then drinking the broth.

For snacks while traveling, we froze fillets from the backbone. Eaten raw, they were crunchy and quite flavorful.

At other times, when coming upon herds of caribou, we were able to get surprisingly close to the animals. Kamaoyoak had taught me how to approach them slowly and quietly so that they would remain calm—regarding us, it seemed, as simply two other caribou. If the animal we shot fell dead, the others would run off; but if it was young, and only wounded, they might stay around.

STILL PUSHING WEST in early May, we began to see seals on the ice. Often we were fooled by shadows, and I found it difficult to judge distances, with so few visual references on the barren snowscape.

I recall Napaseekadlak stalking one seal that seemed to me to be about a hundred yards away. I had stopped the sled and stationed myself by the dogs to keep them quiet as he walked ahead with a rifle. Whenever the seal raised its head, he stopped in his tracks, motionless.

As long minutes passed, I realized that the animal was nearly a quarter of a mile away. Finally Napaseekadlak knelt and fired one shot. This was an anxious moment. We had no food for the dogs, and if the wounded seal fell back through its hole in the ice to die in the water, we would not be able to recover it.

I raised the sled anchor, and the dogs raced forward, barking with excitement. Napaseekadlak greeted me with a wide smile, and I knew that the dogs would be eating well. To my surprise, it wasn't the common ringed seal, but a huge *ugjuk*, or bearded seal, weighing more than Napaseekadlak and I combined (right).

Later in the trip, when many seals appeared on the ice to sun themselves, the dogs would race from hole to hole. We played the game, giving them their heads, hanging on to the sled as it zigzagged across the ice. Of course, each seal would escape back through its hole before the dogs got to it.

As we approached Amundsen Gulf, the ice on the southern shore became progressively rougher. And the weather grew warmer—so warm that at times it rained. We quickly took shelter in the tent, for if our fur clothing became wet, it would soon be caked with ice. When the rain stopped, we set out again, and with dampness still in the air, the sounds

we made were amplified. Before, all sounds had been absorbed by the dry powder snow, but now the dogs brought forth a tattoo of footsteps; the whip cracked as sharply as rifle fire, and the sled crashed over the rough ice with a thunderous noise.

The cliffs around us were festooned with streamers of ice, and everywhere there was the chaos of a sea frozen in upheaval. We were traveling in an eerie, frosted fairyland.

The ice at the mouths of some of the rivers had already started to break up, and the going became hazardous where river water washed over the still-frozen sea. Even so, travel on the ice was easier than on the disappearing snow inland.

Once, as we inched along the endless coast of the District of Mackenzie, we spotted a large black object in the distance. As we drew closer I realized that it was a shipwreck. Hard aground and locked in the ice, she was a 76-foot steel-hulled trading vessel named *Nechilik* (page 310).

I climbed aboard to find her in astonishingly good condition, even though she appeared to have been there for years. A plaque aboard told me she had been built in 1942 and registered in Saint John, New Brunswick.

Boats are my passion. While Napaseekadlak made tea, I fingered the wheel of the vessel and wondered. How had she come to be abandoned? Who sailed her, from where,



Bloody trail of a bearded seal marks a successful hunt. Creeping stealthily over the ice, Napaseekadlak caught this 350-pound *ugjuk* napping in the sun.

After another hunt he feeds the ever-hungry dogs (right), who dispatch their portions of seal meat in minutes.



1.



2.



3.



4.



1. Construction time, 20 minutes— and no mortgage loan. First step in building a snowhouse is to find the proper snow: deep and hard. Having chosen his site, Tipana digs a rectangular pit; the surface around it will become a sleeping bench in the completed igloo.

2. Snowhouse takes shape. Tipana rings the pit with the first layer of six-inch-thick snow blocks, shearing their tops in an upward spiral. Two-foot-high doorway will be cut out from inside the igloo.

3. Carving and tapering the arching blocks, Tipana begins to tilt them inward for a windproof roof. Colin will provide unskilled labor by chinking cracks with loose snow.

4. Eyebrows rimed by frozen breath, Tipana peers from his nearly finished igloo. The last block will be lifted on end from inside, then turned flat and settled in place on the projecting edges of the surrounding blocks.

5. Inside the icy dwelling, walls of snow transmit light for a hunter repairing a torn caribou mitten (right). Body heat and a Primus stove can warm an igloo fifty degrees above the outside temperature, while caribou skins shield occupants from the icy floor. Most Eskimos, however, have now abandoned the traditional snowhouse for government-built dwellings and a settled life.

5.







Tortured by inner fires, the Smoking Hills send swirling vapor trails into the gloom. Napaseekadlak called this "the land where there is no snow in winter."

Other forces imprison the wreck of the trading ship *Nechilik*, gripped by landfast ice (left). On her way in September 1957 from Cambridge Bay to Tuktoyaktuk with supplies and a cargo of furs—fox, bear, and seal—she struck a submerged reef and was beached. The remoteness of the area discouraged the Hudson's Bay Company from trying to salvage its vessel.

with what cargo, on her final voyage? The answers I would learn much later, far from this lonely, frozen fastness (caption below). Now I felt a sadness, knowing she would never sail again. Still she would be well preserved in death.

There were many useful items aboard *Nechilik*—handsome brass lamps, for example—but the food on our loaded sled was more vital. So we left the ship as we found her, a mute, alien prisoner on that remote Arctic shore.

BY MID-MAY we had reached the DEW line site at Clinton Point. Though we usually stayed with Eskimo friends at our DEW line stops, we looked forward to the movie at the radar station. Films are rotated among the sites, and it happened that the schedule of one film—a Western made in Italy—coincided with our itinerary. Thus, we saw the same blazing gunfight again and again. Napaseekadlak never tired of it. "I wish I had that pistol," he said with a grin. "It never runs out of ammunition!"

We left Clinton Point on May 22, after waiting for the sun to burn off a heavy veil of fog. This day had a special meaning for me, because, as I recorded in my diary:

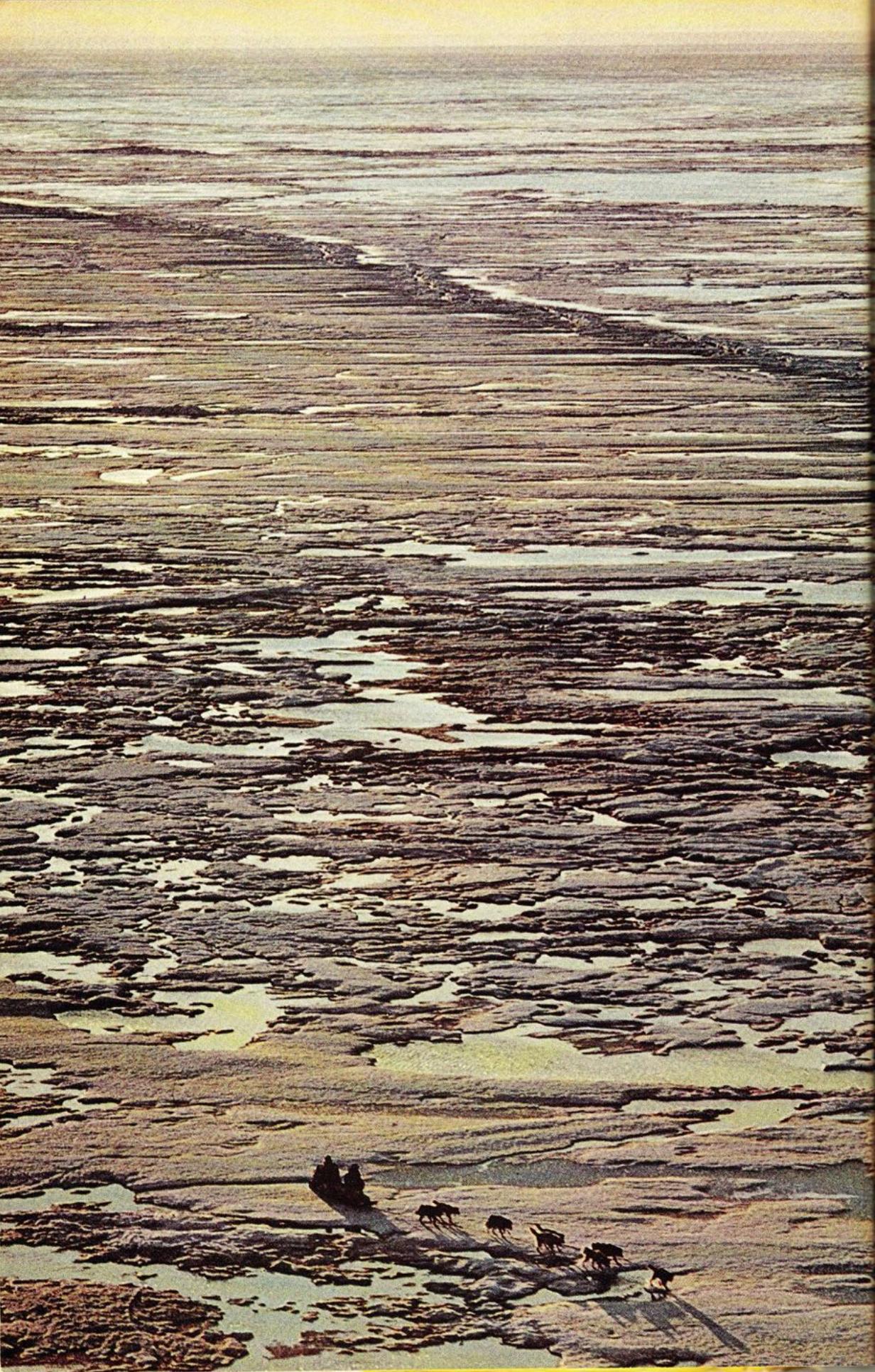
Today is my birthday. I'm 27. This is my third birthday since I left home, but I didn't think about that until this evening. The years go by, and if I wish to do all the things I plan, I must hurry.

We had to hurry, too, if we were to keep ahead of spring breakup. But it started to catch up with us several weeks later. We had passed the Smoking Hills (left), near the mouth of the Horton River, and observed—as had Rasmussen half a century earlier—the gray-blue smoke billowing from fissures in the slopes. The smoke is from smoldering layers of bituminous shale.

The ice was now covered with pools of water, and a screen of cold spray rose up in the wake of the dogs. At times I thought I could smell the sea through the ever-widening cracks. When the temperature dropped, the spray on the dogs froze, turning their coats into chilly armor.

In places open leads forced us inland, onto terrain etched and frozen into fields of crystal knives. Napaseekadlak fitted the dogs with little boots made from sealskin to protect their paws (page 315).

Our team leader at that time was a





nameless massive gray animal—part dog, part wolf. She was haughty and proud, possessed of great strength and character. She always seemed to know what was expected of her, and she did her job well. She would not allow us to pet her, but there had never been any need to discipline her.

Napaseekadlak had an amazing rapport with dogs, speaking to them with just the right inflections to keep the team working at top efficiency. But once, near the end of a long day as we raced a storm toward a DEW line station a dozen miles away, his urging failed. The big gray leader had simply gone as far as she wanted to go.

So he hit her. From that moment, she was driven by defiance. She continued on for a time, but her movements were full of spite. For example, when commanded to go right, she would make a sharp 90-degree turn, rather than the gradual swing in that direction.

We finally gave up and made camp. But the dog wasn't to forget the humiliation of having been struck. That night, as the storm bore down on us, that magnificent animal stood erect, with her face to the wind—stood like that until she could stand no longer. She fell only after the savage wind had sucked the last bit of life from her.

WE WOKE UP on the morning of June 11 to leave the land for the last time by dogsled. Here the sea ice and shore were separated by open water. Just the night before, we had scrambled to the beach on a floating bridge of ice, which was now a flimsy, half-melted honeycomb.

To get back over to our highway on the frozen sea, I attempted to pole-vault across with the long stick, which Eskimos call an *ayoutak*, used to probe for holes under the meltwater on the ice. I fell short, and reached the sea ice wet and annoyed. I pulled the lead dog across by rope, and the others, being harnessed to the trace, had to swim across.

But Napaseekadlak was left stranded. He finally worked his way across on a narrow ice bridge, which collapsed. He, too, was soaking wet, but it could have been worse. Like most Eskimos, Napaseekadlak could not swim.

At Nicholson Peninsula photographer Nicholas DeVore flew in to join us for the last leg of the sled journey. Our progress was good until we came to a place where a stream had poured its flood out onto the sea ice. Leading the dogs, we carefully waded

“The sun revolved in a clear sky as we threaded our way past pools of water atop the ice,” wrote Colin after a ride through a sunlit night near Nicholson Peninsula.

across the narrowest spot and once again found firmer footing.

Farther west the great Mackenzie River too had broken, opening a 100-mile stretch of water across the delta where the 2,600-mile-long river finally meets the Beaufort Sea (map, page 300). It would now be impassable by sled and dogs, and we knew we would have to complete the trek in a canoe.

I gave all the dogs to friends in Tuktoyaktuk, a settlement of several hundred on a lake-strewn peninsula. Blossom was the only one to have stayed with the team from the start, and it grieved me to leave her. She had performed well, and, unlike most working dogs in the Arctic, she was a companion. She had made us laugh with her acts of mischief at times when we should have been crying with hunger and pain.

We purchased a 22-foot canoe and two 25-horsepower outboard motors. I thought it best that we carry a spare engine because my understanding of things mechanical is not as solid as my trust in dogs.

IN LATE JUNE we left Tuktoyaktuk. The trip across the delta was easy enough, but once on the other side, we were astonished to find sea ice solid to the shore. Suddenly I longed for the dogs and sled.

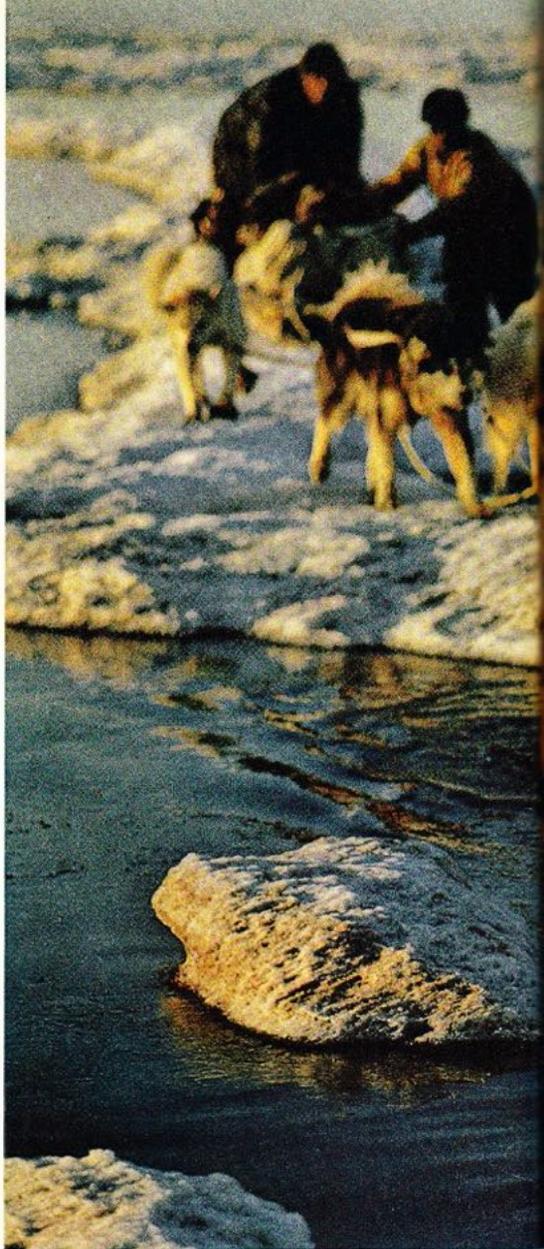
We could do nothing until the ice went out, so we took the canoe up the Blow River in Yukon Territory, where we camped for a week. Then we got as far as Herschel Island before the ice closed in once again.

Our food supply was in good shape, for there was an abundance of wildlife, including ducks and geese. Also, near Herschel Island, a stray caribou walked into our camp. Napaseekadlak was so startled that he missed with his first shot. We made the kill, however, and Napaseekadlak cut the meat into strips and hung it up to dry.

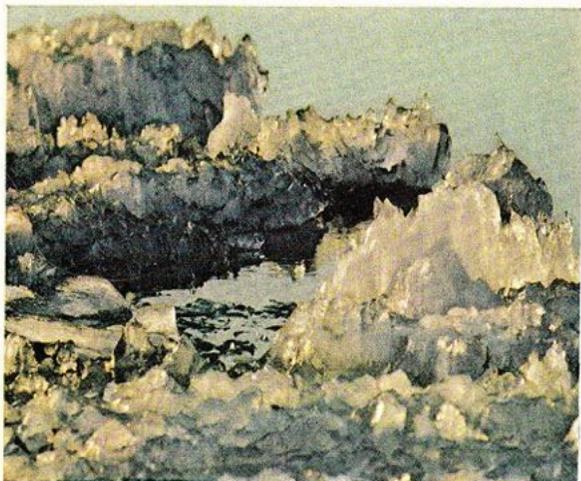
Even more exciting for Napaseekadlak was finding part of a whale rib near our camp on Herschel Island. Years ago he hunted whales out of Dorset Island in Hudson Strait, and Fort Ross on Somerset Island. But in the late 1960's he moved to Spence Bay, northwest of the Simpson Peninsula, where there are no whales.

As he looked at the whale bone, his mind must have been flooded with memories. Later he spent many evenings carving the bone—into a sculpture of a whale.

Favorable winds pushed back the ice, and



Bred to be tough, Colin's sled dogs wade through a pool of bone-chilling water; one takes to the dry toehold of an ice island. The dogs can splash across flooded ice without harm, but must have seal-skin boots when faced with fields of ice needles (right).



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our canoe moved on toward the nearby Alaskan border. Traveling now was predictable and monotonous. Where an ice-free river mouth opened into the sea, we could use the motor. Otherwise we paddled or portaged. The ice still stretched to the western horizon, but we could usually push through the tidal cracks along the shore.

At long last we reached Alaska. Four-fifths of my journey was over.

We stopped briefly at Demarcation Point. The bronze border marker's wooden frame, I noticed, had been clawed by polar bears. Beyond Demarcation Bay, ice was no longer a problem. Now our only wish was for sunny days free of wind and rain.

At Barter Island we visited with Fred Gordon, a hunter and close friend. He told us that his wife had perished in a blizzard that winter. She was the third acquaintance of mine to have died in this manner during the three years I had been in the Arctic.

IT WAS JULY 15 when we reached Prudhoe Bay. Summer had rouged the North Slope with the fragile tints of wild flowers, and the sun was up around the clock. The darkness of Arctic winter, the ice, the cold, the uplifting solitude of the vast land—all this seemed far behind us now.

Charles Towill, an oil-company representative, arranged for me to call my mother in England from Prudhoe Bay. When I spoke to her, I learned for the first time that my sister had been married for several weeks.

Fitted with hard hats, Napaseekadlak and I were taken on a tour of the oil facilities at Prudhoe (page 321). My Eskimo companion marveled at the network of roads, built up above the surrounding tundra, that connected the complex of oil wells. The wells, Prudhoe's reason for existence, were all capped and awaiting construction of a pipeline—officially approved last November—to carry petroleum to the oil-thirsty south.*

We set out on the final leg of our long journey, but we were not to finish without another blow from the weather. Shortly after leaving Prudhoe, we beached our canoe for two days in the face of heavy winds and rains.

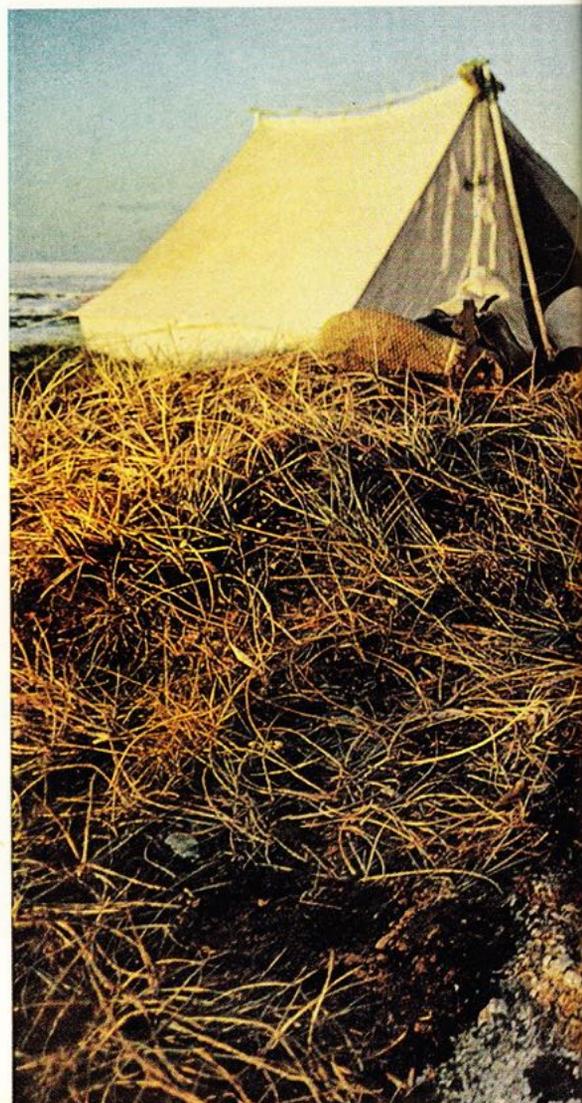
Warm, sunny days followed—so warm that Napaseekadlak spent much of the time in shirt sleeves. Still, the water along the coast was littered with (Continued on page 321)

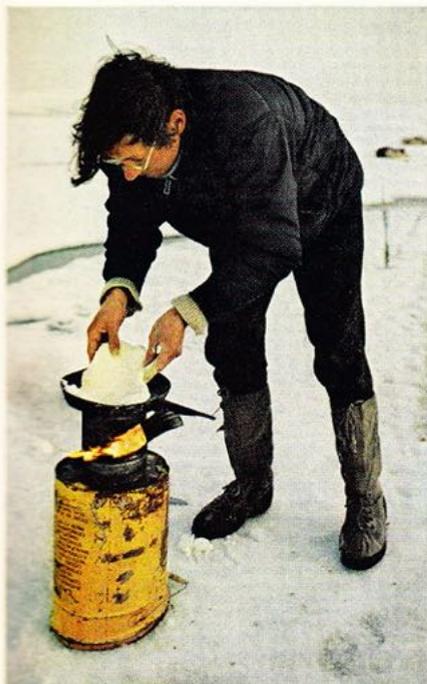
*William S. Ellis discussed the pros and cons of the North Slope pipeline in the October 1971 GEOGRAPHIC.



Winter bows to spring, but survival remains a problem. Colin and Napaseekadlak empty boots and change clothes swiftly after a surprise dunking (above). Loss of the Primus stove forces them to convert a coffee tin—here sitting atop an empty gasoline can—into a seal-oil cooking range for pan-fried bread (right).

Camped on the banks of the Blow River, Colin



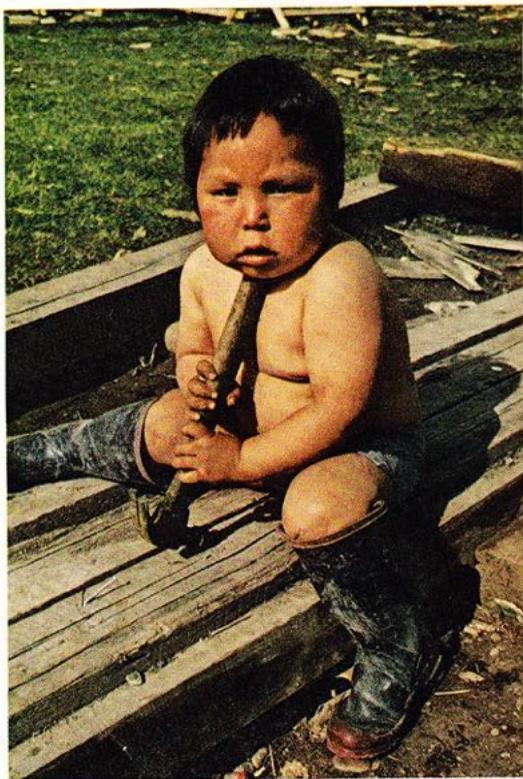
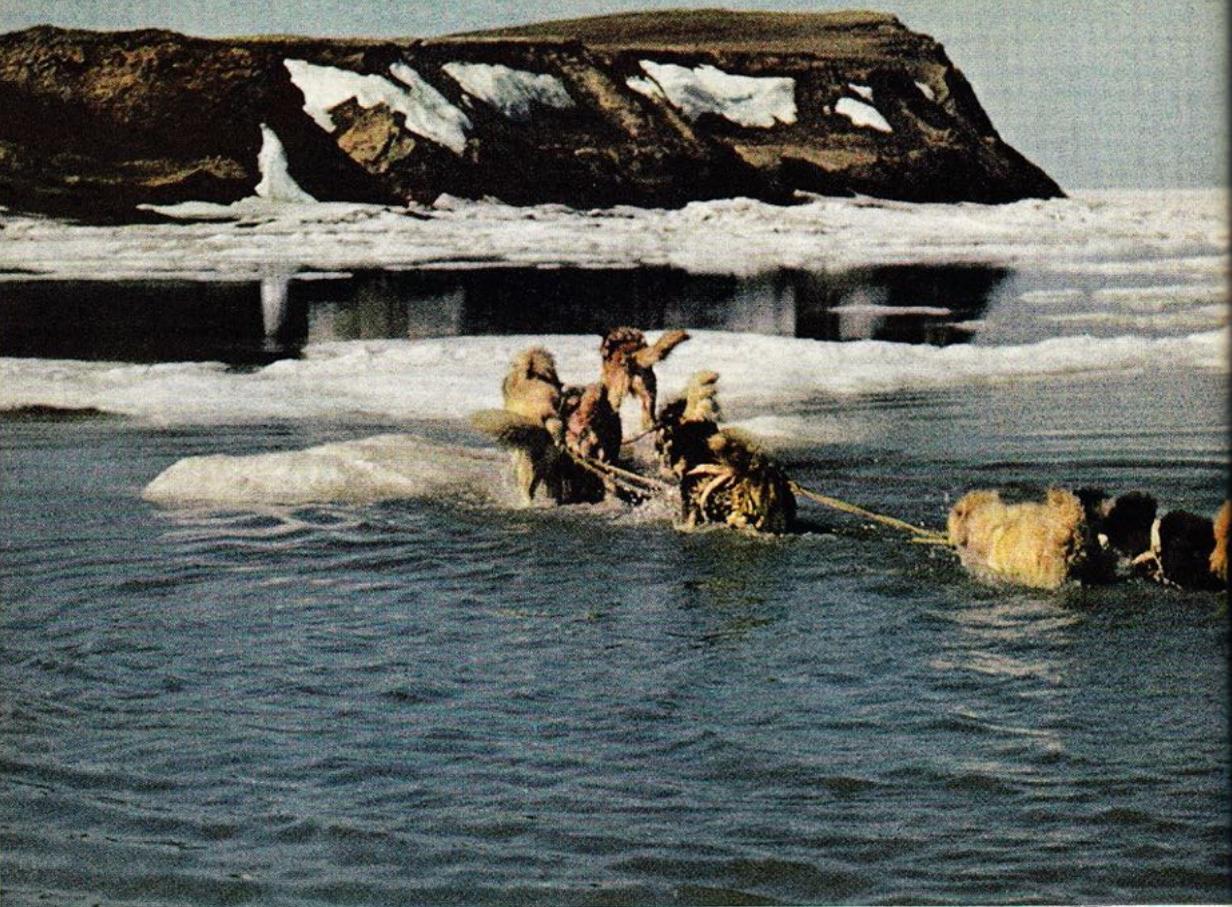


and Napaseekadlak pluck a brace of black brant for a late night's cookout (above); another gift of spring reaches the dinner table in the form of wild-goose eggs left deserted on the nest (below).

Though he carried some supplies—coffee, tea, flour, and sugar—Colin often depended for his existence on the whims of a harsh environment, each night's dinner a result of that day's hunting luck.

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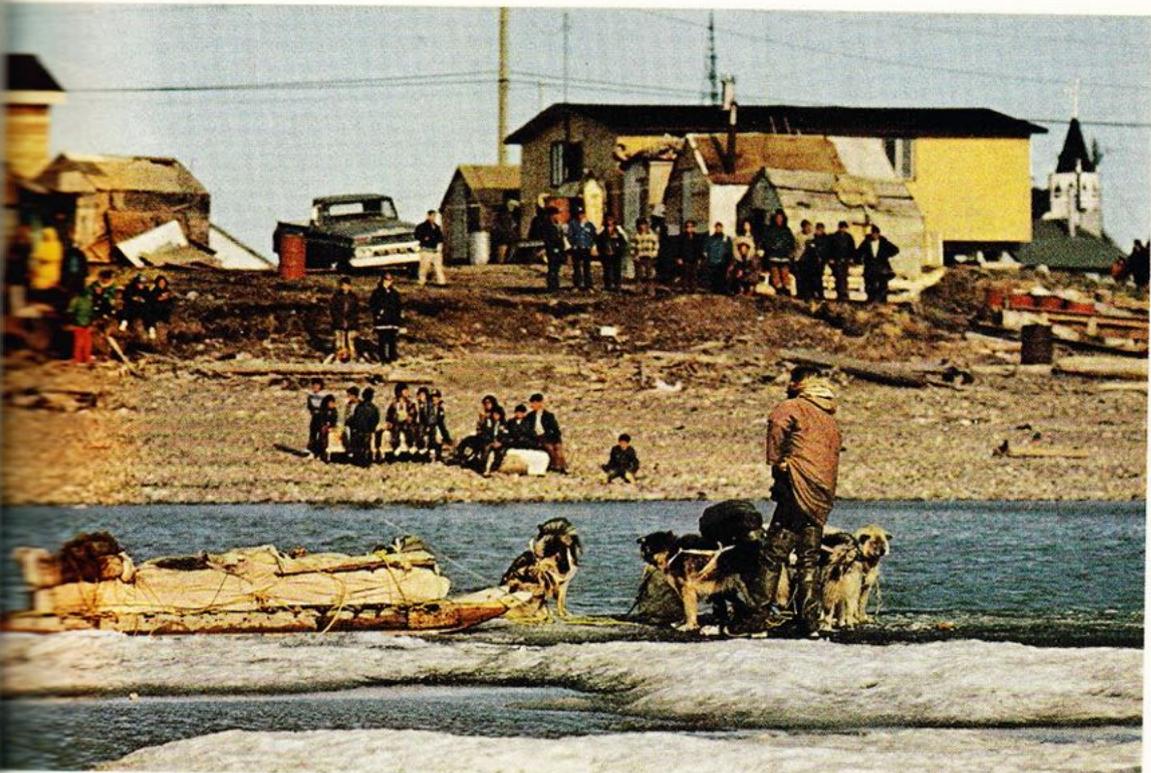




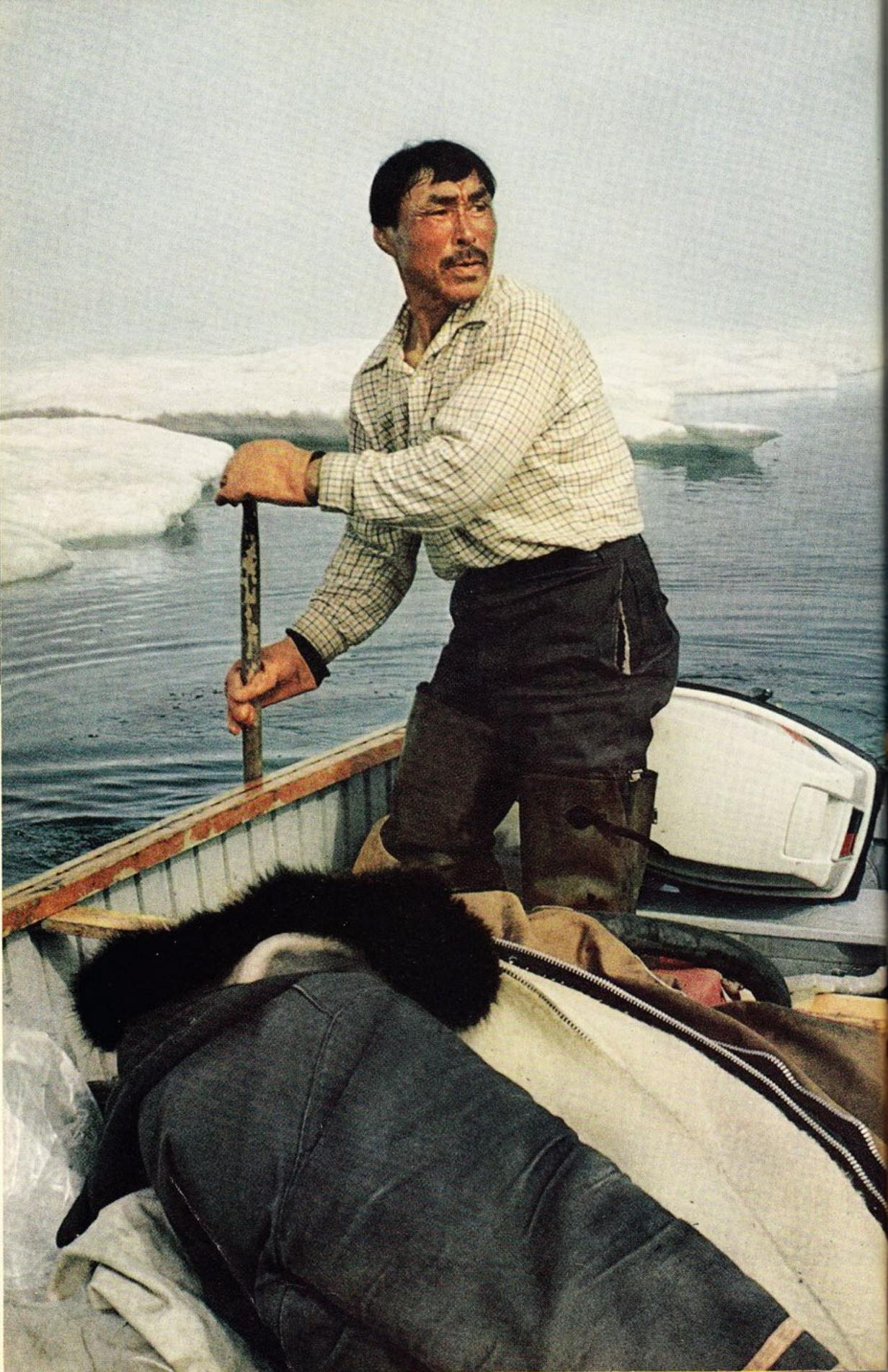
Seagoing sled carries Colin and his guide as the dogs strain toward the headland of Nicholson Peninsula (above). Waterproof canvas wrapped tight around some of the supplies gives added buoyancy to the wooden sled.

Enjoying the appearance of travelers from the sea, the townspeople of Tuktoyaktuk flock to the beach to greet them (right); even toddlers turn out for the occasion (left). A modern settlement near the wide Mackenzie Delta, Tuktoyaktuk serves as a supply port for the central Arctic.

Though Colin's adoption of Eskimo ways helped him deal with the Arctic's uncertain temper, it also created problems. "I used to live in one world," he writes. "Now I live in two, and my mind does not know where to settle."

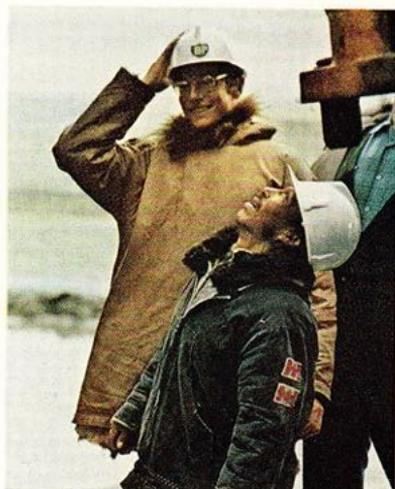


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Far from home but still in his element, Napaseekadlak poles through a broken ice field in Alaska (left). Later he joins Colin for a hard-hat tour of the oil rigs at Prudhoe Bay (right). From here, the author radiotelephoned his family—the first time he had been in touch with them for nearly two years.



STEVE MCCUTCHEON

floes. On July 23, with the sun still glowing late at night, we pulled our canoe up on the shore at Point Barrow. Beyond, the sea ice again closed in solidly. This was our destination, and nature, it seemed, did not plan to let us go farther.

The 2,500-mile journey was over.

MY ESKIMO FRIENDS find it difficult to understand why I undertook so long and arduous a journey. I confess I find it equally difficult to explain to them.

My first winter in the Arctic, I used to look from the window of my office in Cambridge Bay and see the Eskimos of the settlement heading out on their snowmobiles to hunt caribou and other game. I felt restless and confined.

Although the government provided me with a house, I chose to live with Kamaoyoak, and he was forever telling me stories of great hunts, of storms survived, of sled dogs with noble character. It was he who inspired me to challenge the Arctic using only the skills of an ancient people—skills newly learned by me, and increasingly forgotten by them.

I started on the trip figuring that it would take four months. It took nearer to six. I would not want to repeat the adventure.

But I know now that I can burn seal blubber when I need a fire. I know I can find warmth in a snowhouse when the temperature is 60 below zero. I know that I can take nourishment from the marrow of a caribou bone when there is nothing else to eat.

I know too that, all things considered, the passing of the times when those practices were part of everyday Eskimo life is not to be mourned. That life had many fine qualities, however—a willingness to share all until there was nothing, for example. It will be a tragedy if this too is lost. Still, Kamaoyoak's stories fell short of telling all.

When I visited him in Cambridge Bay while making the trip, he must have sensed that I knew this. That would explain our changed relationship. It was now one of mutual understanding. A certain magic sprang from the gap that separated our generations and cultures, and that spell was now broken, to be replaced with an even deeper bond.

Now, we both knew that the great hunt consisted mostly of a long walk and an empty stomach. □